ROBERT A.
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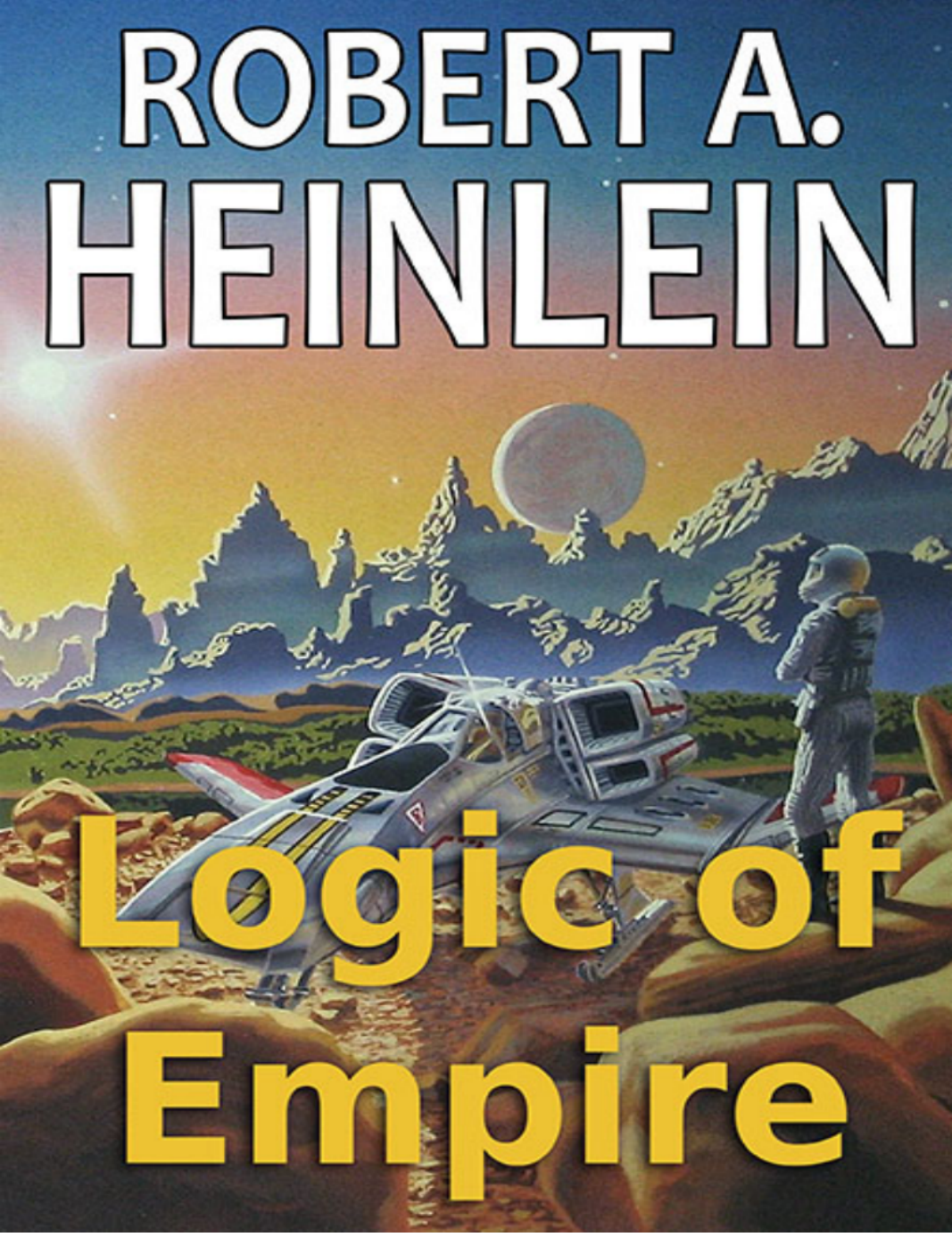

Logic of Empire

'Don't be a sentimental fool, Sam!'

'Sentimental, or not,' Jones persisted, 'I know human slavery when I see it. That's what you've got on Venus.'

Humphrey Wingate snorted. 'That's utterly ridiculous. The company's labor clients are employees, working under legal contracts, freely entered into.'

Jones' eyebrows raised slightly. 'So? What kind of a contract is it that throws a man into jail if he quits his job?'

'That's not the case. Any client can quit his job on the usual two weeks notice-I ought to know; I -'

'Yes, I know,' agreed Jones in a tired voice. 'You're a lawyer. You know all about contracts. But the trouble with you, you dunderheaded fool, is that all you understand is legal phrases. Free contract-nuts! What I'm talking about is facts, not legalisms. I don't care what the contract says-those people are slaves!'

Wingate emptied his glass and set it down. 'So I'm a dunderheaded fool, am I? Well, I'll tell you what you are, Sam Houston Jones-you are a half-baked parlor pink. You've never had to work for a living in your life and you think it's just too dreadful that anyone else should have to. No, wait a minute,' he continued, as Jones opened his mouth, 'listen to me. The company's clients on Venus are a damn sight better off than most people of their own class here on Earth. They are certain of a job, of food, and a place to sleep. If they get sick, they're certain of medical attention. The trouble with people of that class is that they don't want to work -,

'Who does?'

'Don't be funny. The trouble is, if they weren't under a fairly tight contract, they'd throw up a good job the minute they got bored with it and expect the company to give 'em a free ride back to Earth. Now it may not have occurred to your fine, free charitable mind, but the company has obligations to its stockholders-you, for instance!-and it can't afford to run an interplanetary ferry for the

benefit of a class of people that feel that the world owes them a living.'

'You got me that time, pal,' Jones acknowledged with a wry face, '-that crack about me being a stockholder. I'm ashamed of it.'

'Then why don't you sell?'

Jones looked disgusted. 'What kind of a solution is that? Do you think I can avoid the responsibility of knowing about it just unloading my stock?'

'Oh, the devil with it,' said Wingate. 'Drink up.'

'Righto,' agreed Jones. It was his first night aground after a practice cruise as a reserve officer; he needed to catch up on his drinking. Too bad, thought Wingate, that the cruise should have touched at Venus-'All out! All out! Up aaaall you idlers! Show a leg there! Show a leg and grab a sock!' The raucous voice sawed its way through Wingate's aching head. He opened his eyes, was blinded by raw white light, and shut them hastily. But the voice would not let him alone. 'Ten minutes till breakfast,' it rasped. 'Come and get it, or we'll throw it out!'

He opened his eyes again, and with trembling willpower forced them to track. Legs moved past his eyes, denim clad legs mostly, though some were bare-repulsive hairy nakedness. A confusion of male voices, from which he could catch words but not sentences, was accompanied by an obbligato of metallic sounds, muffled but pervasive-shrrg, shrrg, thump! Shrrg, shrrg, thump! The thump with which the cycle was completed hurt his aching head but was not as nerve stretching as another noise, a toneless whirring sibilance which he could neither locate nor escape.

The air was full of the odor of human beings, too many of them in too small a space. There was nothing so distinct as to be fairly termed a stench, nor was the supply of oxygen inadequate. But the room was filled with the warm, slightly musky smell of bodies still heated by bedclothes, bodies not dirty but not freshly washed. It was oppressive and unappetizing-in his present state almost nauseating.

He began to have some appreciation of the nature of his surroundings; he was in a bunkroom of some sort. It was crowded with men, men getting up, shuffling about, pulling on clothes. He lay on the bottom-most of a tier of four narrow bunks. Through the

interstices between the legs which crowded around him and moved past his face he could see other such tiers around the walls and away from the walls, stacked floor to ceiling and supported by stanchions.

Someone sat down on the foot of Wingate's bunk, crowding his broad fundamental against Wingate's ankles while he drew on his socks. Wingate squirmed his feet away from the intrusion. The stranger turned his face toward him. 'Did I crowd 'ja, bud? Sorry.' Then he added, not unkindly, 'Better rustle out of there. The Master-at-Arms'll be riding you to get them bunks up.' He yawned hugely, and started to get up, quite evidently having dismissed Wingate and Wingate's affairs from his mind.

'Wait a minute!' Wingate demanded hastily.

'Huh?'

'Where am I? In jail?'

The stranger studied Wingate's bloodshot eyes and puffy, unwashed face with detached but unmalicious interest. 'Boy, oh boy, you must 'a' done a good job of drinking up your bounty money.'

'Bounty money? What the hell are you talking about?'

'Honest to God, don't you know where you are?'

'No.'

'Well . . . ' The other seemed reluctant to proclaim a truth made silly by its self-evidence until Wingate's expression convinced him that he really wanted to know. 'Well, you're in the Evening Star, headed for Venus.'

A couple of minutes later the stranger touched him on the arm. 'Don't take it so hard, bud. There's nothing to get excited about.'

Wingate took his hands from his face and pressed them against his temples. 'It's not real,' he said, speaking more to himself than to the other. 'It can't be real -,

'Stow it. Come and get your breakfast.'

'I couldn't eat anything.'

'Nuts. Know how you feel . . . felt that way sometimes myself. Food is just the ticket.' The Master-at-Arms settled the issue by coming up and prodding Wingate in the ribs with his truncheon.

'What d'yuh think this is-sickbay, or first class? Get those bunks hooked up.'

'Easy, mate, easy,' Wingate's new acquaintance conciliated, 'our pal's not himself this morning.' As he spoke he dragged Wingate to his feet with one massive hand, then with the other shoved the tier of bunks up and against the wall. Hooks clicked into their sockets, and the tier stayed up, flat to the wall.

'He'll be a damn sight less himself if he interferes with my routine,' the petty officer predicted. But he moved on. Wingate stood barefooted on the floorplates, immobile and overcome by a feeling of helpless indecision which was re-inforced by the fact that he was dressed only in his underwear. His champion studied him.

'You forgot your pillow. Here-' He reached down into the pocket formed by the lowest bunk and the wall and hauled out a flat package covered with transparent plastic. He broke the seal and shook out the contents, a single coverall garment of heavy denim. Wingate put it on gratefully. 'You can get the squeezer to issue you a pair of slippers after breakfast,' his friend added. 'Right now we gotta eat.'

The last of the queue had left the galley window by the time they reached it and the window was closed. Wingate's companion pounded on it. 'Open up in there!'

It slammed open. 'No seconds,' a face announced.

The stranger prevented the descent of the window with his hand. 'We don't want seconds, shipmate, we want firsts.'

'Why the devil can't you show up on time?' the galley functionary groused. But he slapped two ration cartons down on the broad sill of the issuing window. The big fellow handed one to Wingate, and sat down on the floor-plates, his back supported by the galley bulkhead.

'What's your name, bud?' he enquired, as he skinned the cover off his ration. 'Mine's Hartley-"Satchel" Hartley.'

'Mine is Humphrey Wingate.'

'Okay, Hump. Pleased to meet 'cha. Now what's all this song and dance you been giving me?' He spooned up an impossible bite of baked eggs and sucked coffee from the end of his carton.

'Well,' said Wingate, his face twisted with worry, 'I guess I've been shanghaied.' He tried to emulate Hartley's method of drinking, and got the brown liquid over his face.

'Here-that's no way to do,' Hartley said hastily. 'Put the nipple in your mouth, then don't squeeze any harder than you suck. Like this.' He illustrated. 'Your theory don't seem very sound to me. The company don't need crimps when there's plenty of guys standing in line for a chance to sign up. What happened? Can't you remember?'

Wingate tried. 'The last thing I recall,' he said, 'is arguing with a gyro driver over his fare.'

Hartley nodded. 'They'll gyp you every time. D'you think he put the slug on you?'

'Well . . . no, I guess not. I seem to be all right, except for the damndest hangover you can imagine.'

'You'll feel better. You ought to be glad the Evening Star is a high-gravity ship instead of a trajectory job. Then you'd really be sick, and no foolin'.'

'How's that?'

'I mean that she accelerates or decelerates her whole run. Has to, because she carries cabin passengers. If we had been sent by a freighter, it'd be a different story. They gun 'em into the right trajectory, then go weightless for the rest of the trip. Man, how the new chums do suffer!' He chuckled.

Wingate was in no condition to dwell on the hardships of space sickness. 'What T can't figure out,' he said, 'is how I landed here. Do you suppose they could have brought me aboard by mistake, thinking I was somebody else?'

'Can't say. Say, aren't you going to finish your breakfast?'

'I've had all I want.' Hartley took his statement as an invitation and quickly finished off Wingate's ration. Then he stood up, crumpled the two cartons into a ball, stuffed them down a disposal chute, and said,

'What are you going to do about it?'

'What am I going to do about it?' A look of decision came over Wingate's face. 'I'm going to march right straight up to the Captain and demand an explanation, that's what I'm going to do!'

'I'd take that by easy stages, Hump,' Hartley commented doubtfully.

'Easy stages, hell!' He stood up quickly. 'Ow! My head!'

The Master-at-Arms referred them to the Chief Master-at-Arms in order to get rid of them. Hartley waited with Wingate outside the stateroom of the Chief Master-at-Arms to keep him company. 'Better sell 'em your bill of goods pretty pronto,' he advised.

'Why?'

'We'll ground on. the Moon in a few hours. The stop to refuel at Luna City for deep space will be your last chance to get out, unless you want to walk back.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' Wingate agreed delightedly. 'I thought I'd have to make the round trip in any case.'

'Shouldn't be surprised but what you could pick up the Morning Star in a week or two. If it's their mistake, they'll have to return you.'

'I can beat that,' said Wingate eagerly. 'I'll go right straight to the bank at Luna City, have them arrange a letter of credit with my bank, and buy a ticket on the Earth-Moon shuttle.'

Hartley's manner underwent a subtle change. He had never in his life 'arranged a letter of credit'. Perhaps such a man could walk up to the Captain and lay down the law.

The Chief Master-at-Arms listened to Wingate's story with obvious impatience, and interrupted him in the middle of it to consult his roster of emigrants. He thumbed through it to the Ws, and pointed to a line. Wingate read it with a sinking feeling. There was his own name, correctly spelled. 'Now get out,' ordered the official, 'and quit wasting my time.'

But Wingate stood up to him. 'You have no authority in this matter-none whatsoever. I insist that you take me to the Captain.'

'Why, you-' Wingate thought momentarily that the man was going to strike him. He interrupted.

'Be careful what you do. You are apparently the victim of an honest mistake-but your legal position will be very shaky indeed, if you disregard the requirements of spacewise law under which this vessel is licensed. I don't think your Captain would be pleased to have to explain such actions on your part in federal court.'

That he had gotten the man angry was evident. But a man does not get to be chief police officer of a major transport by jeopardizing his superior officers. His jaw muscles twitched but he pressed a button, saying nothing. A junior master-at-arms appeared. 'Take this man to the Purser.' He turned his back in dismissal and dialed a number on the ship's intercommunication system.

Wingate was let in to see the Purser, ex-officio company business agent, after only a short wait. 'What's this all about?' that officer demanded. 'If you have a complaint, why can't you present it at the morning hearings in the regular order?'

Wingate explained his predicament as clearly, convincingly, and persuasively as he knew how. 'And so you see,' he concluded, 'I want to be put aground at Luna City. I've no desire to cause the company any embarrassment over what was undoubtedly an unintentional mishap-particularly as I am forced to admit that I had been celebrating rather freely and, perhaps, in some manner, contributed to the mistake.'

The Purser, who had listened noncommittally to his recital, made no answer. He shuffled through a high stack of file folders which rested on one corner of his deck, selected one, and opened it. It contained a sheaf of legal-size papers clipped together at the top. These he studied leisurely for several minutes, while Wingate

stood waiting.

The Purser breathed with an asthmatic noisiness while he read, and, from time to time, drummed on his bared teeth with his fingernails. Wingate had about decided, in his none too steady nervous condition, that if the man approached his hand to his mouth just once more that he, Wingate, would scream and start throwing things. At this point the Purser chucked the dossier across the desk toward Wingate. 'Better have a look at these,' he said.

Wingate did so. The main exhibit he found to be a contract, duly entered into, between Humphrey Wingate and the Venus Development Company for six years of indentured labor on the planet Venus.

'That your signature?' asked the Purser.

Wingate's professional caution stood him in good stead. He studied the signature closely in order to gain time while he tried to collect his wits. 'Well,' he said at last, 'I will stipulate that it looks very much like my signature, but I will not concede that it is my signature- I'm not a handwriting expert.' The Purser brushed aside the objection with an air of annoyance. 'I haven't time to quibble with you. Let's check the thumbprint. Here.' He shoved an impression pad across his desk. For a moment Wingate considered standing on his legal rights by refusing, but no, that would prejudice his case. He had nothing to lose; it couldn't be his thumbprint on the contract. Unless-But it was. Even his untrained eye could see that the two prints matched. He fought back a surge of panic. This was probably a nightmare, inspired by his argument last night with Jones. Or, if by some wild chance it were real, it was a frame-up in which he must find the flaw. Men of his sort were not framed; the whole thing was ridiculous. He marshaled his words carefully.

'I won't dispute your position, my dear sir. In some fashion both you and I have been made the victims of a rather sorry joke. It seems hardly necessary to point out that a man who is unconscious, as I must have been last night, may have his thumbprint taken without his knowledge. Superficially this contract is valid and I assume naturally your good faith in the matter. But, in fact, the instrument lacks one necessary element of a contract.'

'Which is?'

'The intention on the part of both parties to enter into a contractual relationship. Notwithstanding signature and thumbprint I had no intention of contracting which can easily be shown by other factors. I am a successful lawyer with a good practice, as my tax returns will show. It is not reasonable to believe-and no court will believe-that I voluntarily gave up my accustomed life for six years of indenture at a much lower income.'

'So you're a lawyer, eh? Perhaps there has been chicanery-on your part. How does it happen that you represent yourself here as a radio technician?'

Wingate again had to steady himself at this unexpected flank attack. He was in truth a radio expert-it was his cherished hobby-but how had they known? Shut up, he told himself. Don't admit anything. 'The whole thing is ridiculous,' he protested. 'I insist that 1 be taken to see the Captain-I can break that contract in ten minutes time.'

The Purser waited before replying. 'Are you through speaking your piece?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. You've had your say, now I'll have mine. You listen to me, Mister Spacelawyer. That contract was drawn up by some of the shrewdest legal minds in two planets. They had specifically in mind that worthless bums would sign it, drink up their bounty money, and then decide that they didn't want to go to work after all. That contract has been subjected to every sort of attack possible and revised so that it can't be broken by the devil himself.

'You're not peddling your curbstone law to another stumblebum in this case; you are talking to a man who knows just where he stands, legally. As for seeing the Captain-if you think the commanding officer of a major vessel has nothing more to do than listen to the rhira-dreams of a self-appointed word artist, you've got another think coming! Return to your quarters!'

Wingate started to speak, thought better of it, and turned to go. This would require some thought. The Purser stopped him. 'Wait. Here's your copy of the contract.' He chucked it, the flimsy white sheets riffled to the deck. Wingate picked them up and left silently.

Hartley was waiting for him in the passageway. 'How d'ja make out, Hump?'

'Not so well. No, I don't want to talk about it. I've got to think.' They walked silently back the way they had come toward the ladder which gave access to the lower decks. A figure ascended from the ladder and, came toward them. Wingate noted it without interest.

He looked again. Suddenly the whole preposterous chain of events fell into place; he shouted in relief. 'Sam!' he called out. 'Sam-you cockeyed old so-and-so. I should have spotted your handiwork.' It was all clear now; Sam had framed him with a phony shanghai. Probably the skipper was a pal of Sam's-a reserve officer, maybe-and they had cooked it up between them. It was a rough sort of a joke, but he was too relieved to be angry. Just the same he would make Jones pay for his fun, somehow, on the jump back from Luna City.

It was then that he noticed that Jones was not laughing.

Furthermore he was dressed-most unreasonably-in the same blue denim that the contract laborers were. 'Hump,' he was saying, 'are you still drunk?'

'Me? No. What's the-'

'Don't you realize we're in a jam?'

'Oh hell, Sam, a joke's a joke, but don't keep it up any longer. I've caught on, I tell you. I don't mind-it was a good gag.'

'Gag, eh?' said Jones bitterly. 'I suppose it was just a gag when you talked me into signing up.'

'I persuaded you to sign up?'

'You certainly did. You were so damn sure you knew what you were talking about. You claimed that we could sign up, spend a month or so, on Venus, and come home. You wanted to bet on it. So we went around to the docks and signed up. It seemed like a good idea then-the only way to settle the argument.'

Wingate whistled softly. 'Well, I'll be-Sam, I haven't the

slightest recollection of it. I must have drawn a blank before I passed out.'

'Yeah, I guess so. Too bad you didn't pass out sooner. Not that I'm blaming you; you didn't drag me. Anyhow, I'm on my way up to try to straighten it out.'

'Better wait a minute till you hear what happened to me. Oh yes-Sam, this is, uh, Satchel Hartley. Good sort.' Hartley had been waiting uncertainly near them; he stepped forward and shook hands.

Wingate brought Jones up to date, and added, 'So you see your reception isn't likely to be too friendly. I guess I muffed it. But we are sure to break the contract as soon as we can get a hearing on time alone.'

'How do you mean?'

'We were signed up less than twelve hours before ship lifting. That's contrary to the Space Precautionary Act.'

'Yes-yes, I see what you mean. The Moon's in her last quarter; they would lift ship some time after midnight to take advantage of favorable earthswing. I wonder what time it was when we signed on?'

Wingate took out his contract copy. The notary's stamp showed a time of eleven thirty-two. 'Great Day!' he shouted. 'I knew there would be a flaw in it somewhere. This contract is invalid on its face. The ship's log will prove it.'

Jones studied it. 'Look again,' he said. Wingate did so. The stamp showed eleven thirty-two, but A.M., not P.M.

'But that's impossible,' he protested.

'Of course it is. But it's official. I think we will find that the story is that we were signed on in the morning, paid our bounty money, and had one last glorious luau before we were carried aboard. I seem to recollect some trouble in getting the recruiter to sign us up. Maybe we convinced, him by kicking in our bounty money.'

'But we didn't sign up in the morning. It's not true and I can prove it.'

'Sure you can prove it-but how can you prove it without going back to Earth first!'

'So you see it's this way,' Jones decided after some minutes of somewhat fruitless discussion, 'there is no sense in trying to break our contracts here and now; they'll laugh at us. The thing to do is to make money talk, and talk loud. The only way I can see to get us off at Luna City is to post non-performance bonds with the company bank there-cash, and damn big ones too.'

'How big?'

'Twenty thousand credits, at least, I should guess.'

'But that's not equitable-it's all out of proportion.'

'Quit worrying about equity, will you? Can't you realize that they've got us where the hair is short? This won't be a bond set by a court ruling; it's got to be big enough to make a minor company official take a chance on doing something that's not in the book.'

'I can't raise such a bond.'

'Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it.'

Wingate wanted to argue the point, but did not. There are times when it is very convenient to have a wealthy friend.

'I've got to get a radiogram off to my sister,' Jones went on, 'to get this done -,

'Why your sister? Why not your family firm?'

'Because we need fast action, that's why. The lawyers that handle our family finances would fiddle and fume around trying to confirm the message. They'd send a message back to the Captain, asking if Sam Houston Jones were really aboard, and he would answer "No", as I'm signed up as Sam Jones. I had some silly idea of staying out of the news broadcasts, on account of the family.'

'You can't blame them,' protested Wingate, feeling an obscure clannish loyalty to his colleague in law, 'they're handling other people's money.'

'I'm not blaming them. But I've got to have fast action and Sis'll do what I ask her. I'll phrase the message so she'll know it's me. The only hurdle now is to persuade the Purser to let me send a message on tick.'

He was gone for a long time on this mission. Hartley waited with Wingate, both to keep him company and because of a strong human interest in unusual events. When Jones finally appeared he wore a look of tight-lipped annoyance. Wingate, seeing the expression, felt a sudden, chilling apprehension. 'Couldn't you send it? Wouldn't he let you?'

'Oh, he let me-finally,' Jones admitted, 'but that Purser-man, is he tight!'

Even without the alarm gongs Wingate would have been acutely aware of the grounding at Luna City. The sudden change from the high gravity deceleration of their approach to the weak surface gravity-one-sixth earth normal-of the Moon took immediate toll on his abused stomach. It was well that he had not eaten much. Both Hartley and Jones were deep-space men and regarded enough acceleration to permit normal swallowing as adequate for any purpose. There is a curious lack of sympathy between those who are subject to space sickness and those who are immune to it. Why the spectacle of a man regurgitating, choked, eyes streaming with tears, stomach knotted with pain, should seem funny is difficult to see, but there it is. It divides the human race into two distinct and antipathetic groups-amused contempt on one side, helpless murderous hatred on the other.

Neither Hartley nor Jones had the inherent sadism which is too frequently evident on such occasions-for example the great wit who suggests salt pork as a remedy-but, feeling no discomfort themselves, they were simply unable to comprehend (having forgotten the soul-twisting intensity of their own experience as new chums) that Wingate was literally suffering 'a fate worse than death'-much worse, for it was stretched into a sensible eternity by a distortion of the time sense known only to sufferers from space sickness, seasickness, and (we are told) smokers of hashish.

As a matter of fact, the stop on the Moon was less than four hours long. Toward the end of the wait Wingate had quieted down sufficiently again to take an interest in the expected reply to Jones' message, particularly after Jones had assured him that he

would be able to spend the expected lay-over under bond at Luna City in a hotel equipped with a centrifuge.

But the answer was delayed. Jones had expected to hear from his sister within an hour, perhaps before the Evening Star grounded at the Luna City docks. As the hours stretched out he managed to make himself very unpopular at the radio room by his repeated inquiries. An over-worked clerk had sent him brusquely about his business for the seventeenth time when he heard the alarm sound preparatory to raising ship; he went back and admitted to Wingate that his scheme had apparently failed.

'Of course, we've got ten minutes yet,' he finished unhopefully, 'if the message should arrive before they raise ship, the Captain could still put us aground at the last minute. We'll go back and haunt 'em some more right up to the last. But it looks like a thin chance.'

'Ten minutes-'said Wingate, 'couldn't we manage somehow to slip outside and run for it?'

Jones looked exasperated. 'Have you ever tried running in a total vacuum?'

Wingate had very little time in which to fret on the passage from Luna City to Venus. He learned a great deal about the care and cleaning of washrooms, and spent ten hours a day perfecting his new skill. Masters-at-Arms have long memories.

The Evening Star passed beyond the limits of ship-to-Terra radio communication shortly after leaving Luna City; there was nothing to do but wait until arrival at Adonis, port of the north polar colony. The company radio there was strong enough to remain in communication at all times except for the sixty days bracketing superior conjunction and a shorter period of solar interference at inferior conjunction. 'They will probably be waiting for us with a release order when we ground,' Jones assured Wingate, 'and we'll go back on the return trip of the Evening Star-first class, this time. Or, at the very Worst, we'll have to wait over for the Morning Star. That wouldn't be so bad, once I get some credit transferred; we could spend it at Venusburg.'

'I suppose you went there on your cruise,' Wingate said, curiosity showing in his voice. He was no Sybarite, but the lurid

reputation of the most infamous, or famous-depending on one's evaluations-pleasure city of three planets was enough to stir the imagination of the least hedonistic.

'No-worse luck!' Jones denied. 'I was on a hull inspection board the whole time. Some of my messmates went, though boy!' He whistled softly and shook his head.

But there was no one awaiting their arrival, nor was there any message. Again they stood around the communication office until told sharply and officially to get on back to their quarters and stand by to disembark, '- and be quick about it!'

'I'll see you in the receiving barracks, Hump,' were Jones' last words before he hurried off to his own compartment.

The Master-at-Arms responsible for the compartment in which Hartley and Wingate were billeted lined his charges up in a rough column of two's and, when ordered to do so by the metallic bray of the ship's loudspeaker, conducted them through the central passageway and down four decks to the lower passenger port. It stood open; they shuffled through the lock and out of the ship-not into the free air of Venus, but into a sheet metal tunnel which joined it, after some fifty yards, to a building.

The air within the tunnel was still acrid from the atomized antiseptic with which it had been flushed out, but to Wingate it was nevertheless fresh and stimulating after the stale flatness of the repeatedly reconditioned air of the transport. That, plus the surface gravity of Venus, five-sixths of earth-normal, strong enough to prevent nausea yet low enough to produce a feeling of lightness and strength-these things combined to give him an irrational optimism, an up-and-at-'em frame of mind.

The exit from the tunnel gave into a moderately large room, windowless but brilliantly and glarelessly lighted from concealed sources. It contained no furniture.

'Squaaad-HALT!' called out the Master-at-Arms, and handed papers to a slight, clerkish-appearing man who stood near an inner doorway. The man glanced at the papers, counted the detachment, then signed one sheet, which he handed back to the ship's petty officer who accepted it and returned through the tunnel.

The clerkish man turned to the immigrants. He was

dressed, Wingate noted, in nothing but the briefest of shorts, hardly more than a strap, and his entire body, even his feet, was a smooth mellow tan. 'Now men,' he said in a mild voice, 'strip off your clothes and put them in the hopper.' He indicated a fixture set in one wall.

'Why?' asked Wingate. His manner was uncontentious but he made no move to comply.

'Come now,' he was answered, still mildly but with a note of annoyance, 'don't argue. It's for your own protection. We can't afford to import disease.'

Wingate checked a reply and unzipped his coverall. Several who had paused to hear the outcome followed his example. Suits, shoes, underclothing, socks, they all went into the hopper. 'Follow me,' said their guide.

In the next room the naked herd were confronted by four 'barbers' armed with electric clippers and rubber gloves who proceeded to clip them smooth. Again Wingate felt disposed to argue, but decided the issue was not worth it. But he wondered if the female labor clients were required to submit to such drastic quarantine precautions. It would be a shame, it seemed to him, to sacrifice a beautiful head of hair that had been twenty years in growing.

The succeeding room was a shower room. A curtain of warm spray completely blocked passage through the room. Wingate entered it unreluctantly, even eagerly, and fairly wallowed in the first decent bath he had been able to take since leaving Earth. They were plentifully supplied with liquid green soap, strong and smelly, but which lathered freely. Half a dozen attendants, dressed as skimpily as their guide, stood on the far side of the wall of water and saw to it that the squad remained under the shower a fixed time and scrubbed. In some cases they made highly personal suggestions to insure thoroughness. Each of them wore a red cross on a white field affixed to his belt which lent justification to their officiousness.

Blasts of warm air in the exit passageway dried them quickly and completely.

'Hold still.' Wingate complied, the bored hospital orderly who had spoken dabbed at Wingate's upper arm with a swab which felt cold to touch, then scratched the spot. 'That's all, move on.' Wingate added himself to the queue at the next table. The experience

was repeated on the other arm. By the time he had worked down to the far end of the room the outer sides of each arm were covered with little red scratches, more than twenty of them.

'What's this all about?' he asked the hospital clerk at the end of the line, who had counted his scratches and checked his name off a list.

'Skin tests.. . to check your resistances and immunities.'

'Resistance to what?'

'Anything. Both terrestrial and Venerian diseases. Fungoids, the Venus ones are, mostly. Move on, you're holding up the line.' He heard more about it later. It took from two to three weeks to recondition the ordinary terrestrial to Venus conditions. Until that reconditioning was complete and immunity was established to the new hazards of another planet it was literally death to an Earth man to expose his skin and particularly his mucous membranes to the ravenous invisible parasites of the surface of Venus.

The ceaseless fight of life against life which is the dominant characteristic of life anywhere proceeds with special intensity, under conditions of high metabolism, in the steamy jungles of Venus. The general bacteriophage which has so nearly eliminated disease caused by pathogenic micro-organisms on Earth was found capable of a subtle modification which made it potent against the analogous but different diseases of Venus. The hungry fungi were another matter.

Imagine the worst of the fungoid-type skin diseases you have ever encountered-ringworm, dhobie itch, athlete's foot, Chinese rot, saltwater itch, seven year itch. Add to that your conception of mold of damp rot, of scale, of toadstools feeding on decay. Then conceive them speeded up in their processes, visibly crawling as you watch-picture them attacking your eyeballs, your armpits, the soft wet tissues inside your mouth, working down into your lungs.

The first Venus expedition was lost entirely. The second had a surgeon with sufficient imagination to provide what seemed a liberal supply of salicylic acid and mercury salicylate as well as a small ultraviolet radiator. Three of them returned.

But permanent colonization depends on adaptation to environment, not insulating against it. Luna City might be cited as a

case which denies this proposition but it is only superficially so. While it is true that the 'lunatics' are absolutely dependent on their citywide hermetically-sealed air bubble, Luna City is not a self-sustaining colony; it is an outpost, useful as a mining station, as an observatory, as a refueling stop beyond the densest portion of Terra's gravitational field.

Venus is a colony. The colonists breathe the air of Venus, eat its food, and expose their skins to its climate and natural hazards. Only the cold polar regions-approximately equivalent in weather conditions to an Amazonian jungle on a hot day in the rainy season-are tenable by terrestrials, but here they slop barefooted on the marshy soil in a true ecological balance.

Wingate ate the meal that was offered him-satisfactory but roughly served and dull, except for Venus sweet-sour melon, the portion of which he ate would have fetched a price in a Chicago gourmets' restaurant equivalent to the food budget for a week of a middle-class family-and located his assigned sleeping billet. Thereafter he attempted to locate Sam Houston Jones. He could find no sign of him among the other labor clients, nor any one who remembered having seen him. He was advised by one of the permanent staff of the conditioning station to enquire of the factor's clerk. This he did, in the ingratiating manner he had learned it was wise to use in dealing with minor functionaries.

'Come back in the morning. The lists will be posted.'

'Thank you, sir. Sorry to have bothered you, but I can't find him and I was afraid he might have taken sick or something. Could you tell me if he is on the sick list.'

'Oh, well-Wait a minute.' The clerk thumbed through his records. 'Hmmm.. . you say he was in the Evening Star?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, he's not. . . Mmmm, no-Oh, yes, here he is. He didn't disembark here.'

'What did you say!?'

'He went on with the Evening Star to New Auckland,

South Pole. He's stamped in as a machinist's helper. If you had told me that, I'd 'a' known. All the metal workers in this consignment were sent to work on the new South Power Station.'

After a moment Wingate pulled himself together enough to murmur, 'Thanks for your trouble.'

"S all right. Don't ~mention it.' The clerk turned away.

South Pole Colony! He muttered it to himself. South Pole Colony, his only friend twelve thousand miles away. At last Wingate felt alone, alone and trapped, abandoned. During the short interval between waking up aboard the transport and finding Jones also aboard he had not had time fully to appreciate his predicament, nor had he, then, lost his upper class arrogance, the innate conviction that it could not be serious-such things just don't' happen to people, not to people one knows!

But in the meantime he had suffered such assaults to his human dignity (the Chief Master-at-Arms had seen to some of it) that he was no longer certain of his essential inviolability from unjust or arbitrary treatment. But now, shaved and bathed without his consent, stripped of his clothing and attired in a harness like breechclout, transported millions of miles from his social matrix, subject to the orders of persons indifferent to his feelings and who claimed legal control over his person and actions, and now, most bitterly, cut off from the one human contact which had given him support and courage and hope, he realized at last with chilling thoroughness that anything could happen to him, to him, Humphrey Belmont Wingate, successful attorney-at-law and member of all the night clubs.

'Wingate!'

'That's you, Jack. Go on in, don't keep them waiting.' Wingate pushed through the doorway and found himself in a fairly crowded room. Thirty-odd men were seated around the sides of the room. Near the door a clerk sat at a desk, busy with papers. One brisk-mannered individual stood in the cleared space between the chairs near a low platform on which all the illumination of the room was concentrated. The clerk at the door looked up to say, 'Step up where they can see you.' He pointed a stylus at the platform.

Wingate moved forward and did as he was bade, blinking at the brilliant light. 'Contract number 482-23-06,' read the

clerk, 'client Humphrey Wingate, six years, radio technician non-certified, pay grade six-D, contract now available for assignment.' Three weeks it had taken them to condition him, three weeks with no word from Jones. He had passed his exposure test without infection; he was about to enter the active period of his indenture. The brisk man spoke up close on the last words of the clerk:

'Now here, patrons, if you please-we have an exceptionally promising man. I hardly dare tell you the ratings he received on his intelligence, adaptability, and general information tests. In fact I won't, except to tell you that Administration has put in a protective offer of a thousand credits. But it would be a shame to use any such client for the routine work of administration when we need good men so badly to wrest wealth from the wilderness. I venture to predict that the lucky bidder who obtains the services of this client will be using him as a foreman within a month. But look him over for yourselves, talk to him, and see for yourselves.'

The clerk whispered something to the speaker. He nodded and added, 'I am required to notify you, gentlemen and patrons, that this client has given the usual legal notice of two weeks, subject of course to liens of record.' He laughed jovially, and cocked one eyebrow as if there were some huge joke behind his remarks. No one paid attention to the announcement; to a limited extent Wingate appreciated wryly the nature of the jest. He had given notice the day after he found out that Jones had been sent to South Pole Colony, and had discovered that while he was free theoretically to quit, it was freedom to starve on Venus, unless he first worked out his bounty, and his. passage both ways.

Several of the patrons gathered around the platform and looked him over, discussing him as they did so. 'Not too well muscled.' 'I'm not over-eager to bid on these smart boys; they're trouble-makers.' 'No, but a stupid client isn't worth his keep.' 'What can he do? I'm going to have a look at his record.' They drifted over to the clerk's desk and scrutinized the results of the many tests and examinations that Wingate had undergone during his period of quarantine. All but one beady-eyed individual who sidled up closer to Wingate, and, resting one foot on the platform so that he could bring his face nearer, spoke in confidential tones.

'I'm not interested in those phony puff-sheets, bub. Tell me about yourself.'

'There's not much to tell.'

'Loosen up. You'll like my place. Just like a home - I run a free crock to Venusburg for my boys. Had any experience handling niggers?'

'No.'

'Well, the natives ain't niggers anyhow, except in a manner of speaking. You look like you could boss a gang. Had any experience?'

'Not much.'

'Well . . . maybe you're modest. I like a man who keeps his mouth shut. And my boys like me. I never let my pusher take kickbacks.'

'No,' put in another patron who had returned to the side of the platform, 'you save that for yourself, Rigsbee.'

'You stay out o' this, Van Huysen!'

The newcomer, a heavy-set, middle-aged man, ignored the other and addressed Wingate himself. 'You have given notice. Why?'

'The whole thing was a mistake. I was drunk.'

'Will you do honest work in the meantime?'

Wingate considered this. 'Yes,' he said finally. The heavy-set man nodded and walked heavily back to his chair, settling his broad girth with care and giving his harness a hitch.

When the others were seated the spokesman announced cheerfully, 'Now, gentlemen, if you are quite through-Let's hear an opening offer for this contract. I wish I could afford to bid him in as my assistant, by George, I do! Now . . . do I hear an offer?'

'Six hundred.'

'Please, patrons! Did you not hear me mention a protection of one thousand?'

'1 don't think you mean it. He's a sleeper.'

The company agent raised his eyebrows. 'I'm sorry. I'll have to ask the client to step down from the platform.'

But before Wingate could do so another voice said, 'One thousand.'

'Now that's better!' exclaimed the agent. 'I should have known that you gentlemen wouldn't let a real opportunity escape you. But a ship can't fly on one jet. Do I hear eleven hundred? Come, patrons, you can't make your fortunes without clients. Do I hear -'

'Eleven hundred.'

'Eleven hundred from Patron Rigsbee! And a bargain it would be at that price. But I doubt if you will get it. Do I hear twelve?'

The heavy-set man flicked a thumb upward. 'Twelve hundred from Patron van Huysen. I see I've made a mistake and am wasting your time; the intervals should be not less than two hundred. Do I hear fourteen? Do I hear fourteen? Going once for twelve.. . going twi-'

'Fourteen,' Rigsbee said suddenly.

'Seventeen,' Van Huysen added at once.

'Eighteen,' snapped Rigsbee.

'Nooo,' said the agent, 'no interval of less than two, please.'

'All right, dammit, nineteen!'

'Nineteen I hear. It's a hard number to write; who'll make it twenty-one?' Van Huysen's thumb flicked again. 'Twentyone it is. It takes money to make money. What do I hear? What do I hear?' He paused. 'Going once for twenty-one going twice for twenty-one. Are you giving up so easily, Patron Rigsbee?'

'Van Huysen is a-' The rest was muttered too indistinctly to hear.

'One more chance, gentlemen. Going, going . . . GONE!-

He smacked his palms sharply together. '-and sold to Patron van Huysen for twenty-one hundred credits. My congratulations, sir, on a shrewd deal.'

Wingate followed his new master out the far door. They were stopped in the passageway by Rigsbee. 'All right, Van, you've had your fun. I'll cut your loses for two thousand.'

'Out of my way.'

'Don't be a fool. He's no bargain. You don't know how to sweat a man-I do.' Van Huysen ignored him, pushing on past. Wingate followed him out into warm winter drizzle to the parking lot where steel crocodiles were drawn up in parallel rows. Van Huysen paused beside a thirty-foot Remington. 'Get in.'

The long boxlike body of the crock was stowed to its load line with supplies Van Huysen had purchased at the base. Sprawled on the tarpaulin which covered the cargo were half a dozen men. One of them stirred as Wingate climbed over the side. 'Hump! Oh, Hump!'

It was Hartley. Wingate was surprised at his own surge of emotion. He gripped Hartley's hand and exchanged friendly insults. 'Chums,' said Hartley, 'meet Hump Wingate. He's a right guy. Hump, meet the gang. That's Jimmie right behind you. He rassles this velocipede.'

The man designated gave Wingate a bright nod and moved forward into the operator's seat. At a wave from Van Huysen, who had seated his bulk in the little sheltered cabin aft, he pulled back on both control levers and the crocodile crawled away, its caterpillar treads clanking and chunking through the mud.

Three of the six were old-timers, including Jimmie, the driver. They had come along to handle cargo, the ranch products which the patron had brought in to market and the supplies he had purchased to take back. Van Huysen had bought the contracts of two other clients in addition to Wingate and Satchel Hartley. Wingate recognized them as men he had known casually in the Evening Star and at the assignment and conditioning station. They looked a little woebegone, which Wingate could thoroughly understand, but the men from the ranch seemed to be enjoying themselves. They appeared to regard the opportunity to ride a load to and from town as an outing.

They sprawled on the tarpaulin and passed the time gossiping and getting acquainted with the new chums.

But they asked no personal questions. No labor client on Venus ever asked anything about what he had been before he shipped with the company unless he first volunteered information. It 'wasn't done'.

Shortly after leaving the outskirts of Adonis the car slithered down a sloping piece of ground, teetered over a low bank, and splashed logily into water. Van Huysen threw up a window in the bulkhead which separated the cabin from the hold and shouted, 'Dumkopf! How many times do I tell you to take those launchings slowly?'

'Sorry, Boss,' Jimmie answered. 'I missed it.'

'You keep your eyes peeled, or I get me a new crocker!' He slammed the port. Jimmie glanced around and gave the other clients a sly wink. He had his hands full; the marsh they were traversing looked like solid ground, so heavily was it overgrown with rank vegetation. The crocodile now functioned as a boat, the broad flanges of the treads acting as paddle wheels. The wedge-shaped prow pushed shrubs and marsh grass aside, air struck and ground down small trees. Occasionally the lugs would bite into the mud of a shoal bottom, and, crawling over a bar, return temporarily to the status of a land vehicle. Jimmie's slender, nervous hands moved constantly over the controls, avoiding large trees and continually seeking the easiest, most nearly direct route, while he split his attention between the terrain and the craft's compass.

Presently the conversation lagged and one of the ranch hands started to sing. He had a passable tenor voice and was soon joined by others. Wingate found himself singing the choruses as fast as he learned them. They sang Pay Book and Since the Pusher Met My Cousin and a mournful thing called They Found Him in the Bush. But this was followed by a light number, The Night the Rain Stopped, which seemed to have an endless string of verses recounting various unlikely happenings which occurred on that occasion. ('The Squeezer bought a round-a-drinks -')

Jimmie drew applause and enthusiastic support in the choruses with a ditty entitled That Redheaded Venusburg Gal, but Wingate considered it inexcusably vulgar. He did not have time to

dwell on the matter; it was followed by a song which drove it out of his mind.

The tenor started it, slowly and softly. The others sang the refrains while he rested-all but Wingate; he was silent and thoughtful throughout. In the triplet of the second verse the tenor dropped out and the others sang in his place.

'Oh, you stamp your paper and you sign your name, ('Come away! Come away!)

'They pay your bounty and you drown your shame.

('Rue the day! Rue the day!)

'They land you down at Ellis Isle and put you in a pen;

'There you see what happens to the Six-Year men-'They haven't paid their bounty and they sign 'em up again!

('Here to stay! Here to stay!)

'But me I'll save my bounty and a ticket on the ship, ('So you say! So you say!)

'And then you'll see me leavin' on the very next trip. ('Come the day! Come the day!)

'Oh, we've heard that kinda story just a thousand times and one.

'Now we wouldn't say you're lyin' but we'd like to see it done.

'We'll see you next at Venusburg apayin' for your fun! And you'll never meet your bounty on this hitch!

('Come away!')

It left Wingate with a feeling of depression not entirely accounted for by the tepid drizzle, the unappetizing landscape, nor by the blanket of pale mist which is the invariable Venerian substitute for the open sky. He withdrew to one corner of the hold and kept to himself, until, much later, Jimmie shouted, 'Lights ahead!'

Wingate leaned out and peered eagerly towards his new home.

Four weeks and no word from Sam Houston Jones. Venus had turned once on its axis, the fortnight long Venerian 'winter' had given way to an equally short 'summer'-indistinguishable from 'winter' except that the rain was a trifle heavier and a little hotter-and now it was 'winter' again. Van Huysen's ranch, being near the pole, was, like most of the tenable area of Venus, never in darkness. The miles-thick, ever present layer of clouds tempered the light of the low-hanging sun during the long day, and, equally, held the heat and diffused the light from a sun just below the horizon to produce a continuing twilight during the two-week periods which were officially 'night', or 'winter'.

Four weeks and no word. Four weeks and no sun, no moon, no stars, no dawn. No clean crisp breath of morning air, no life-quickening beat of noonday sun, no welcome evening shadows, nothing, nothing at all to distinguish one sultry, sticky hour from the next but the treadmill routine of sleep and work and food and sleep again-nothing but the gathering ache in his heart for the cool blue skies of Terra.

He had acceded to the invariable custom that new men should provide a celebration for the other clients and had signed the Squeezer's chits to obtain happywater-rhira-for the purpose-to discover, when first he signed the pay book, that his gesture of fellowship had cost him another four months of delay before he could legally quit his 'job'. Thereupon he had resolved never again to sign a chit, had foresworn the prospect of brief holidays at Venusburg, had promised himself to save every possible credit against his bounty and transportation liens.

Whereupon he discovered that the mild alcoholoid drink was neither a vice nor a luxury, but a necessity, as necessary to human life on Venus as the ultraviolet factor present in all colonial illuminating systems. it produces, not drunkenness, but lightness of heart, freedom from worry, and without it he could not get to sleep. Three nights of self-recrimination and fretting, three days of fatigue-drugged uselessness under the unfriendly eye of the Pusher, and he had signed for his bottle with the rest, even though dully aware that the price of the bottle had washed out more than half of the day's microscopic progress toward freedom.

Nor had he been assigned to radio operation. Van Huysen had an operator. Wingate, although listed on the books as standby operator, went to the swamps with the rest. He discovered on rereading his contract a clause which permitted his patron to do this, and he admitted with half his mind-the detached judicial and legalistic half-that the clause was reasonable and proper, not inequitable.

He went to the swamps. He learned to wheedle and bully the little, mild amphibian people into harvesting the bulbous underwater growth of Hyacinthus veneris johnsoni-Venus swamproot-and to bribe the co-operation of their matriarchs with promises of bonuses in the form of 'thigarek', a term which meant not only cigarette, but tobacco in any form, the staple medium in trade when dealing with the natives.

He took his turn in the chopping sheds and learned, clumsily and slowly, to cut and strip the spongy outer husk from the pea-sized kernel which alone had commercial value and which must be removed intact, without scratch or bruise. The juice from the pods made his hands raw and the odor made him cough and stung his eyes, but he enjoyed it more than the work in the marshes, for it threw him into the company of the female labor clients. Women were quicker at the work than men and their smaller fingers more dextrous in removing the valuable, easily damaged capsule. Men were used for such work only when accumulated crops required extra help.

He learned his new trade from a motherly old person whom the other women addressed as Hazel. She talked as she worked, her gnarled old hands moving steadily and without apparent direction or skill. He could close his eyes and imagine that he was back on Earth and a boy again, hanging around his grandmother's kitchen while she shelled peas and rambled on. 'Don't you fret yourself, boy,' Hazel told him. 'Do your work and shame the devil. There's a great day coming.'

'What kind of great day, Hazel?'

'The day when the Angels of the Lord will rise up and smite the powers of evil. The day when the Prince of Darkness will be cast down into the pit and the Prophet shall reign over the children of Heaven. So don't you worry; it doesn't matter whether you are here or back home when the great day comes; the only thing that matters is your state of grace.'

'Are you sure we will live long enough to see the day?'

She glanced around, then leaned over confidentially. 'The day is almost upon us. Even now the Prophet moves up and down the land gathering his forces. Out of the clean farm country of the Mississippi Valley there comes the Man, known in this world'-she lowered her voice still more-'as Nehemiah Scudder!'

Wingate hoped that his start of surprise and amusement did not show externally. He recalled the name. It was that of a pipsqueak, backwoods evangelist, an unimportant nuisance back on Earth, but the butt of an occasional guying news story, but a man of no possible consequence.

The chopping shed Pusher moved up to their bench. 'Keep your eyes on your work, you! You're way behind now.' Wingate hastened to comply, but Hazel came to his aid.

'You leave him be, Joe Tompson. It takes time to learn chopping.'

'Okay, Mom,' answered the Pusher with a grin, 'but keep him pluggin'. See?'

'I will. You worry about the rest of the shed. This bench'll have its quota.' Wingate had been docked two days running for spoilage. Hazel was lending him poundage now and the Pusher knew it, but everybody liked her, even pushers, who are reputed to like no one, not even themselves.

Wingate stood just outside the gate of the bachelors' compound. There was yet fifteen minutes before lock-up roll call; he had walked out in a subconscious attempt to rid himself of the pervading feeling of claustrophobia which he had had throughout his stay. The attempt was futile; there was no 'outdoorness' about the outdoors on Venus, the bush crowded the clearing in on itself, the leaden misty sky pressed down on his head, and the steamy heat sat on his bare chest. Still, it was better than the bunkroom in spite of the dehydrators.

He had not yet obtained his evening ration of rhira and felt, consequently, nervous and despondent, yet residual self-respect caused him to cherish a few minutes clear thinking before he gave in to cheerful soporific. It's getting me, he thought, in a few more months

I'll be taking every chance to get to Venusburg, or worse yet, signing a chit for married quarters and condemning myself and my kids to a life-sentence. When he first arrived the women clients, with their uniformly dull minds and usually commonplace faces, had seemed entirely unattractive. Now, he realized with dismay, he was no longer so fussy. Why, he was even beginning to lisp, as the other clients did, in unconscious imitation of the amphibians.

Early, he had observed that the clients could be divided roughly into two categories, the child of nature and the broken men. The first were those of little imagination and simple standards. In all probability they had known nothing better back on Earth; they saw in the colonial culture, not slavery, but freedom from responsibility, security, and an occasional spree. The others were the broken men, the outcasts, they who had once been somebody, but, through some defect of character, or some accident, had lost their places in society. Perhaps the judge had said, 'Sentence suspended if you ship for the colonies.'

He realized with sudden panic that his own status was crystallizing; he was becoming one of the broken men. His background on Earth was becoming dim in his mind; he had put off for the last three days the labor of writing another letter to Jones; he had spent all the last shift rationalizing the necessity for taking a couple of days holiday at Venusburg. Face it, son, face it, he told himself. You're slipping, you're letting your mind relax into slave psychology. You've unloaded the problem of getting out of this mess onto Jones - how do you know he can help you? For all you know he may be dead. Out of the dimness of his memory he recaptured a phrase which he had read somewhere, some philosopher of history: 'No slave is ever freed, save he free himself.'

All right, all right-pull up your socks, old son. Take a brace. No more rhira-no, that wasn't practical; a man had to have sleep. Very well, then, no rhira until lights-out, keep your mind clear in the evenings and plan. Keep your eyes open, find out all you can, cultivate friendships, and watch for a chance.

Through the gloom he saw a human figure approaching the gate of the compound. As it approached he saw that it was a woman and supposed it to be one of the female clients. She came closer, he saw that he was mistaken. It was Annek van Huysen, daughter of the patron.

She was a husky, overgrown blond girl with unhappy eyes. He had seen her many times, watching the clients as they returned from their labor, or wandering alone around the ranch clearing. She was neither unsightly, nor in anywise attractive; her heavy adolescent figure needed more to flatter it than the harness which all colonists wore as the maximum tolerable garment.

She stopped before him, and, unzipping the pouch at her waist which served in lieu of pockets, took out a package of cigarettes. 'I found this back there. Did you lose it?'

He knew that she lied; she had picked up nothing since she had come into sight. And the brand was one smoked on Earth and by patrons; no client could afford such. What was she up to?

He noted the eagerness in her face and the rapidity of her breathing, and realized, with confusion, that this girl was trying indirectly to make him a present. Why?

Wingate was not particularly conceited about his own physical beauty, or charm, nor had he any reason to be. But what he had not realized was that among the common run of the clients he stood out like a cock pheasant in a barnyard. But that Annek found him pleasing he was forced to admit; there could be no other explanation for her trumped-up story and her pathetic little present.

His first impulse was to snub her. He wanted nothing of her and resented the invasion of his privacy, and he was vaguely aware that the situation could be awkward, even dangerous to him, involving, as it did, violations of custom which jeopardized the whole social and economic structure. From the viewpoint of the patrons, labor clients were almost as much beyond the pale as the amphibians. A liaison between a labor client and one of the womenfolk of the patrons could easily wake up old Judge Lynch.

But he had not the heart to be brusque with her. He could see the dumb adoration in her eyes; it would have required cold, heartlessness to have repulsed her. Besides, there was nothing coy or provocative in her attitude; her manner was naive, almost childlike in its unsophistication. He recalled his determination to make friends; here was friendship offered, a dangerous friendship, but one which might prove useful in Winning free.

He felt a momentary wave of shame that he should be

weighing the potential usefulness of this defenseless child, but he suppressed it by affirming to himself that he would do her no harm, and, anyhow, there was the old saw about the vindictiveness of a woman scorned.

'Why, perhaps I did lose it,' he evaded, then added, 'It's my favorite brand.'

'Is it?' she said happily. 'Then do take it, in any case.'

'Thank you. Will you smoke one with me? No, I guess that wouldn't do; your father would not want you to stay here that long.'

'Oh, he's busy with his accounts. I saw that before I came out,' she answered, and seemed unaware that she had given away her pitiful little deception. 'But go ahead, I-I hardly ever smoke.'

'Perhaps you prefer a meerschaum pipe, like your father.'

She laughed more than the poor witticism deserved. After that they talked aimlessly, both agreeing that the crop was coming in nicely, that the weather seemed a little cooler than last week, and that there was nothing like a little fresh air after supper.

'Do you ever walk for exercise after supper?' she asked.

He did not say that a long day in the swamps offered more than enough exercise, but agreed that he did.

'So do I,' she blurted out. 'Lots of times up near the water tower.'

He looked at her. 'Is that so? I'll remember that.' The signal for roll call gave him a welcome excuse to get away; three more minutes, he thought, and I would have had to make a date with her.

Wingate found himself called for swamp work the next day, the rush in the chopping sheds having abated. The crock lumbered and splashed its way around the long, meandering circuit, leaving one or more Earthmen at each supervision station. The car was down to four occupants, Wingate, Satchel, the Pusher, and Jimmie the Crocker, when the Pusher signaled for another stop. The flat, bright-eyed heads of amphibian natives broke water on three

sides as soon as they were halted. 'All right, Satchel,' ordered the Pusher, 'this is your billet. Over the side.'

Satchel looked around. 'Where's my skiff?' The ranchers used small flat-bottomed duralumin skiffs in which to collect their day's harvest. There was not one left in the crock.

'You won't need one. You goin' to clean this field for planting.'

'That's okay. Still-I don't see nobody around, and I don't see no solid ground.' The skiffs had a double purpose; if a man were working out of contact with other Earthmen and at some distance from safe dry ground, the skiff became his life boat. If the crocodile which was supposed to collect him broke down, or if for any other reason he had need to sit down or lie down while on station, the skiff gave him a place to do so. The older clients told grim stories of men who had stood in eighteen inches of water for twenty-four, forty-eight, seventy-two hours, and then drowned horribly, out of their heads from sheer fatigue.

'There's dry ground right over there.' The Pusher waved his hand in the general direction of a clump of trees which lay perhaps a quarter of a mile away.

'Maybe so,' answered Satchel equably. 'Let's go see.' He grinned at Jimmie, who turned to the Pusher for instructions.

'Damnation! Don't argue with me! Get over the side!'

'Not,' said Satchel, 'until I've seen something better than two feet of slime to squat on in a pinch.'

The little water people had been following the argument with acute interest. They clucked and lisped in their own language; those who knew some pidgin English appeared to be giving newsy and undoubtedly distorted explanations of the events to their less sophisticated brethren. Fuming as he was, this seemed to add to the Pusher's anger.

'For the last time-get out there!'

'Well,' said Satchel, settling his gross frame more comfortably on the floorplates, 'I'm glad we've finished with that subject.'

Wingate was behind the Pusher. This circumstance probably saved Satchel Hartley at least a scalp wound, for he caught the arm of the Pusher as he struck. Hartley closed in at once; the three wrestled for a few seconds on the bottom of the craft.

Hartley sat on the Pusher's chest while Wingate pried a blackjack away from the clenched fingers of the Pusher's right fist. 'Glad you saw him reach for that, Hump,' Satchel acknowledged, 'or I'd be needin' an aspirin about now.'

'Yeah, I guess so,' Wingate answered, and threw the weapon as far as he could out into the marshy waste. Several of the amphibians streaked after it and dived. 'I guess you can let him up now.'

The Pusher said nothing to them as he brushed himself off, but he turned to the Crocker who had remained quietly in his saddle at the controls the whole time. 'Why the hell didn't you help me?'

'I supposed you could take care of yourself, Boss,' Jimmie answered noncommittally.

Wingate and Hartley finished that 'work period as helpers to labor clients already stationed. The Pusher had completely ignored them except for curt orders necessary to station them. But while they were washing up for supper back at the compound they received word to report to the Big House.

When they were ushered into the Patron's office they found the Pusher already there with his employer and wearing a self-satisfied smirk while Van Huysen's expression was black indeed.

'What's this I hear about you two?' he burst out. 'Refusing work. Jumping my foreman. By Joe, I show you a thing or two!'

'Just a moment, Patron van Huysen,' began Wingate quietly, suddenly at home in the atmosphere of a trial court, 'no one refused duty. Hartley simply protested doing dangerous work without reasonable safeguards. As for the fracas, your foreman attacked us; we acted simply in self-defense, and desisted as soon as we had disarmed him.'

The Pusher leaned over Van Huysen and whispered in his ear. The Patron looked more angry than before. 'You did this with natives watching. Natives! You know colonial law? I could send you to the mines for this.'

'No,' Wingate denied, 'your foreman did it in the presence of natives. Our role was passive and defensive throughout -'

'You call jumping my foreman peaceful? Now you listen to me-Your job here is to work. My foreman's job is to tell you where and how to work. He's not such a dummy as to lose me my investment in a man. He judges what work is dangerous, not you.' The Pusher whispered again to his chief. Van Huysen shook his head. The other persisted, but the Patron cut him off with a gesture, and turned back to the two labor clients.

'See here-I give every dog one bite, but not two. For you, no supper tonight and no rhira. Tomorrow we see how you behave.'

'But Patron van Huys -'

'That's all. Get to your quarters.'

At lights out Wingate found, on crawling into his bunk, that someone had hidden therein a food bar. He munched it gratefully in the dark and wondered who his friend could be. The food stayed the complaints of his stomach but was not sufficient, in the absence of rhira, to permit him to go to sleep. He lay there, staring into the oppressive blackness of the bunkroom and listening to the assorted irritating noises that men can make while sleeping, and considered his position. It had been bad enough but barely tolerable before; now, he was logically certain, it would be as near hell as a vindictive overseer could make it. He was prepared to believe, from what he had seen and the tales he had heard, that it would be very near indeed!

He had been nursing his troubles for perhaps an hour when he felt a hand touch his side. 'Hump! Hump!' came a whisper, 'come outside. Something's up.' It was Jimmie.

He felt his way cautiously through the stacks of bunks and slipped out the door after Jimmie. Satchel was already outside and with him a fourth figure.

It was Annek van Huysen. He wondered how she had been able to get into the locked compound. Her eyes were puffy, as if she had been crying.

Jimmie started to speak at once, in cautious, low tones. 'The kid tells us that I am scheduled to haul you two lugs back into Adonis tomorrow.'

'What for?'

'She doesn't know. But she's afraid it's to sell you South. That doesn't seem likely. The Old Man has never sold anyone South- but then nobody ever jumped his pusher before. I don't know.'

They wasted some minutes in fruitless discussion, then, after a bemused silence, Wingate asked Jimmie, 'Do you know where they keep the keys to the crock?'

'No. Why do y-'

'I could get them for you,' offered Annek eagerly.

'You can't drive a crock.'

'I've watched you for some weeks.'

'Well, suppose you can,' Jimmie continued to protest, 'suppose you run for it in the crock. You'd be lost in ten miles. If you weren't caught, you'd starve.'

Wingate shrugged. 'I'm not going to be sold South.'

'Nor am I,' Hartley added.

'Wait a minute.'

'Well, I don't see any bet-'

'Wait a minute,' Jimmie reiterated snappishly. 'Can't you see I'm trying to think'?'

The other three kept silent for several long moments. At last Jimmie said, 'Okay. Kid, you'd better run along and let us talk. The less you know about this the better for you.' Annek looked hurt, but complied docilely to the extent of withdrawing out of earshot. The

three men conferred for some minutes. At last Wingate motioned for her to rejoin them.

'That's all, Annek,' he told her. 'Thanks a lot for everything you've done. We've figured a way out.' He stopped, and then said awkwardly, 'Well, good night.'

She looked up at him.

Wingate wondered what to do or say next. Finally he led her around the corner of the barracks and bade her good night again. He returned very quickly, looking shame-faced. They re-entered the barracks.

Patron van Huysen also was having trouble getting to sleep. He hated having to discipline his people. By damn, why couldn't they all be good boys and leave him in peace? Not but what there was precious little peace for a rancher these days. It cost more to make a crop than the crop fetched in Adonis-at least it did after the interest was paid.

He had turned his attention to his accounts after dinner that night to try to get the unpleasantness out of his mind, but he found it hard to concentrate on his figures. That man Wingate, now . . . he had bought him as much to keep him away from that slave driver Rigsbee as to get another hand. He had too much money invested in hands as it was in spite of his foreman always complaining about being short of labor. He would either have to sell some, or ask the bank to refinance the mortgage again.

Hands weren't worth their keep any more. You didn't get the kind of men on Venus that used to come when he was a boy. He bent over his books again. If the market went up even a little, the bank should be willing to discount his paper for a little more than last season. Maybe that would do it.

He had been interrupted by a visit from his daughter. Annek he was always glad to see, but this time what she had to say, what she finally blurted out. had only served to make him angry. She, preoccupied with her own thoughts, could not know that she hurt her father's heart, with a pain that was actually physical.

But that had settled the matter insofar as Wingate was concerned. He would get rid of the trouble-maker. Van Huysen ordered his daughter to bed with a roughness he had never before

used on her.

Of course it was all his own fault, he told himself after he had gone to bed. A ranch on Venus was no place to raise a motherless girl. His Annekchen was almost a woman grown now; how was she to find a husband here in these outlands? What would she do if he should die? She did not know it, but there would be nothing left, nothing, not even a ticket to Terra. No, she would not become a labor client's vrouw; no, not while there was a breath left in his old tired body.

Well, Wingate would have to go, and the one they called Satchel, too. But he would not sell them South. No, he had never done that to one of his people. He thought with distaste of the great, factory like plantations a few hundred miles further from the pole, where the temperature was always twenty to thirty degrees higher than it was in his marshes and mortality among labor clients was a standard item in cost accounting. No, he would take them in and trade them at the assignment station; what happened to them at auction there would be none of his business. But he would not sell them directly South.

That gave him an idea; he did a little computing in his head and estimated that he might be able to get enough credit on the two unexpired labor contracts to buy Annek a ticket to Earth. He was quite sure that his sister would take her in, reasonably sure anyway, even though she had quarreled with him over marrying Annek's mother. He could send her a little money from time to time. And perhaps she could learn to be a secretary, or one of those other fine jobs a girl could get on Earth.

But what would the ranch be like without Annekchen?

He was so immersed in his own troubles that he did not hear his daughter slip out of her room and go outside.

Wingate and Hartley tried to appear surprised when they were left behind at muster for work. Jimmie was told to report to the Big House; they saw him a few minutes later, backing the big Remington out of its shed. He picked them up, then trundled back to the Big House and waited for the Patron to appear. Van Huysen came out shortly and climbed into his cabin with neither word nor look for anyone.

The, crocodile started toward Adonis, lumbering a steady ten miles an hour. Wingate and Satchel conversed in subdued voices, waited, and wondered. After an interminable time the crock stopped. The cabin window flew open. 'What's the matter?' Van Huysen demanded. 'Your engine acting up?'

Jimmie grinned at him. 'No, I stopped it.'

'For what?'

'Better come up here and find out.'

'By damn, I do!' The window slammed; presently Van Huysen reappeared, warping his ponderous bulk around the side of the little cabin. 'Now what this monkeyshines?'

'Better get out and walk, Patron. This is the end of the line.' Van Huysen seemed to have no remark suitable in answer, but his expression spoke for him.

'No, I mean it,' Jimmie went on. 'This is the end 'of the line for you. I've stuck to solid ground the whole way, so you could walk back. You'll be able to follow the trail I broke; you ought to be able to make it in three or four hours, fat as you are.'

The Patron looked from Jimmie to the others. Wingate and Satchel closed in slightly, eyes unfriendly. 'Better get goin', Fatty,' Satchel said softly, 'before you get chucked out headfirst.'

Van Huysen pressed back against the rail of the crock, his hands gripping it. 'I won't get out of my own crock,' he said tightly.

Satchel spat in the palm of one hand, then rubbed the two together. 'Okay, Hump. He asked for it -'

'Just a second.' Wingate addressed Van Huysen, 'See here, Patron van Huysen-we don't want to rough you up unless we have to. But there are three of us and we are determined. Better climb out quietly.'

The older man's face was dripping with sweat which was not entirely due to the muggy heat. His chest heaved, he seemed about to defy them. Then something went out inside him. His figure sagged, the defiant lines in his face gave way to a whipped expression which was not good to see.

A moment later he climbed quietly, listlessly, over the side into the ankle-deep mud and stood there, stooped, his legs slightly bent at the knees.

When they were out of sight of the place where they had dropped their patron Jimmie turned the crock off in a new direction. 'Do you suppose he'll make it?' asked Wingate.

'Who?' asked Jimmie. 'Van Huysen? Oh, sure, he'll make it-probably.' He was very busy now with his driving; the crock crawled down a slope and lunged into navigable water. In a few minutes the marsh grass gave way to open water. Wingate saw that they were in a broad lake whose further shores were lost in the mist. Jimmie set a compass course.

The far shore was no more than a strand; it concealed an overgrown bayou. Jimmie followed it a short distance, stopped the crock, and said, 'This must be just about the place,' in an uncertain voice. He dug under the tarpaulin folded up in one corner of the empty hold and drew out a broad flat paddle. He took this to the rail, and, leaning out, he smacked the water loudly with the blade: Slap! . . . slap, slap. . . . Slap!

He waited.

The flat head of an amphibian broke water near the side; it studied Jimmie with bright, merry eyes. 'Hello,' said Jimmie.

it answered in its own language. Jimmie replied in the same tongue, stretching his mouth to reproduce the uncouth clucking syllables. The native listened, then slid underwater again.

He-or, more probably, she-was back in a few minutes, another with her. 'Thigarek?' the newcomer said hopefully.

'Thigarek when we get there, old girl,' Jimmie temporized. 'Here . . . climb aboard.' He held out a hand, which the native accepted and wriggled gracefully inboard. It perched its unhuman, yet oddly pleasing, little figure on the rail near the driver's seat. Jimmie got the car underway.

How long they were guided by their little pilot Wingate did not know, as the timepiece on the control panel was out of order,

but his stomach informed him that it was too long. He rummaged through the cabin and dug out an iron ration which he shared with Satchel and Jimmie. He offered some to the native, but she smelled at it and drew her head away.

Shortly after that there was a sharp hissing noise and a column of steam rose up ten yards ahead of them. Jimmie halted the crock at once. 'Cease firing!' he called out. 'It's just us chickens.'

'Who are you?' came a disembodied voice.

'Fellow travelers.'

'Climb out where we can see you.'

'Okay.'

The native poked Jimmie in the ribs. 'Thigarek,' she stated positively.

'Huh? Oh, sure.' He parceled out trade tobacco until she acknowledged the total, then added one more package for good will. She withdrew a piece of string from her left cheek pouch, tied up her pay, and slid over the side. They saw her swimming away, her prize carried high out of the water.

'Hurry up and show yourself!'

'Coming!' They climbed out into waist-deep water and advanced holding their hands overhead. A squad of four broke cover and looked them over, their weapons lowered but ready. The leader searched their harness pouches and sent one of his men on to look over the crocodile.

'You keep a close watch,' remarked Wingate.

The leader glanced at him. 'Yes,' he said, 'and no. The little people told us you were coming. They're worth all the watch dogs that were ever littered.'

They got underway again with one of the scouting party driving. Their captors were not unfriendly but not disposed to talk. 'Wait till you see the Governor,' they said.

Their destination turned out to be a wide stretch of

moderately high ground. Wingate was amazed at the number of buildings and the numerous population. 'How in the world can they keep a place like this a secret?' he asked Jimmie.

'If the state of Texas were covered with fog and had only the population of Waukegan, Illinois, you could hide quite a lot of things.'

'But wouldn't it show on a map?'

'How well mapped do you think Venus is? Don't be a dope.' On the basis of the few words he had had with Jimmie beforehand Wingate had expected no more than a camp where fugitive clients lurked in the bush while squeezing a precarious living from the country. What he found was a culture and a government. True, it was a rough frontier culture and a simple government with few laws and an unwritten constitution, but a framework of customs was in actual operation and its gross offenders were punished-with no higher degree of injustice than one finds anywhere.

It surprised Humphrey Wingate that fugitive slaves, the scum of Earth, were able to develop an integrated society. It had surprised his ancestors that the transported criminals of Botany Bay should develop a high civilization in Australia. Not that Wingate found the phenomenon of Botany Bay surprising-that was history, and history is never surprising-after it happens.

The success of the colony was more credible to Wingate when he came to know more of the character of the Governor, who was also generalissimo, and administrator of the low and middle justice. (High justice was voted on by the whole community, a procedure that Wingate considered outrageously sloppy, but which seemed to satisfy the community.) As magistrate the Governor handed out decisions with a casual contempt for rules of evidence and legal theory that reminded Wingate of stories 'he had heard of the apocryphal Old Judge Bean. 'The Law West of Pecos', but again the people seemed to like it.

The great shortage of women in the community (men outnumbered them three to one) caused incidents which more than anything else required the decisions of the Governor. Here, Wingate was forced to admit, was a situation in which traditional custom would have been nothing but a source of trouble; 'he admired the shrewd common sense and understanding of human nature with

which the Governor sorted out conflicting strong human passions and suggested modus operandi for getting along together. A man who could maintain a working degree of peace in such matters did not need a legal education.

The Governor held office by election and was advised by an elected council. It was Wingate's private opinion that the Governor would have risen to the top in any society. The man had boundless energy, great gusto for living, a ready thunderous laugh-and the courage and capacity for making decisions. He was a 'natural'.

The three runaways were given a couple of weeks in which to get their bearings and find some job in which they could make themselves useful and self-supporting. Jimmie stayed with his crock, now confiscated for the community, but which still required a driver. There were other crockers available who probably would have liked the job, but there was tacit consent that the man who brought it in should drive it, if he wished. Satchel found a billet in the fields, doing much the same work he had done for Van Huysen. He told Wingate that he was 'actually having to work harder; nevertheless he liked it better because the conditions were, as he put it. 'looser'.

Wingate detested the idea of going back to agricultural work. He had no rational excuse, it was simply that he hated it. His radio experience at last stood him in good stead. The community had a jury-rigged, low-power radio on which a constant listening watch was kept, but which was rarely used for transmission because of the danger of detection. Earlier runaway slave camps had been wiped out by the company police through careless use of radio. Nowadays they hardly dared use it, except in extreme emergency.

But they needed radio. The grapevine telegraph maintained through the somewhat slap-happy help of the little people enabled them to keep some contact with the other fugitive communities with which they were loosely confederated, but it was not really fast, and. any but the simplest of messages were distorted out of recognition.

Wingate was assigned to the community radio when it was discovered that he had appropriate technical knowledge. The previous operator had been lost in the bush. His opposite number was a pleasant old codger, known as Doc, who could listen for signals but who knew nothing of upkeep and repair.

Wingate threw himself into the job of overhauling the antiquated installation. The problems presented by lack of equipment, the necessity of 'making do', gave him a degree of happiness he had not known since he was a boy, but was not aware of it.

He was intrigued by the problem of safety in radio communication. An idea, derived from some account of the pioneer days in radio, gave him a lead. His installation, like all others, communicated by frequency modulation. Somewhere he had seen a diagram for a totally obsolete type of transmitter, an amplitude modulator. He did not have much to go on, but he worked out a circuit which he believed would oscillate in that fashion and which could be hooked up from the gear at hand.

He asked the Governor for permission to attempt to build it. 'Why not? Why not?' the Governor roared at him. 'I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about son, but if you think you can build a radio that the company can't detect, go right ahead. You don't have to ask me; it's your pigeon.'

'I'll have to put the station out of commission for sending.'

'Why not?'

The problem had more knots in it than he had thought. But he labored at it with the clumsy but willing assistance of Doc. His first hookup failed; his forty-third attempt five weeks later worked. Doc, stationed some miles out in the bush, reported himself able to hear the broadcast via a small receiver constructed for the purpose, whereas Wingate picked up nothing whatsoever on the conventional receiver located in the same room with the experimental transmitter.

In the meantime he worked on his book.

Why he was writing a book he could not have told you. Back on Earth it could have been termed a political pamphlet against the colonial system. Here there was no one to convince of his thesis, nor had he any expectation of ever being able to present it to a reading public. Venus was his home. He knew that there was no chance for him ever to return: the only way lay through Adonis, and there, waiting for him, were warrants for half the crimes in the calendar, contract-jumping, theft, kidnapping, criminal abandonment, conspiracy, subverting government. If the company police ever laid

hands on him, they would jail him and lose the key.

No, the book arose, not from any expectation of publication, but from a half-subconscious need to arrange his thoughts. He had suffered a complete upsetting of all the evaluations by which he had lived; for his mental health it was necessary that he formulate new ones. It was natural to his orderly, if somewhat unimaginative, mind that he set his reasons and conclusions forth in writing.

Somewhat diffidently he offered the manuscript to Doc. He had learned that the nickname title had derived from the man's former occupation on Earth; he had been a professor of economics and philosophy in one of the smaller universities. Doc had even offered a partial explanation of his presence on Venus. 'A little matter involving one of my women students,' he confided. 'My wife took an unsympathetic view of the matter and so did the board of regents. The board had long considered my opinions a little too radical.'

'Were they?'

'Heavens, no! I was a rockbound conservative. But I had an unfortunate tendency to express conservative principles in realistic rather than allegorical language.'

'I suppose you're a radical now.'

Doc's eyebrows lifted slightly. 'Not at all. Radical and conservative are terms of emotional attitudes, not sociological opinions.'

Doc accepted the manuscript, read it through, and returned it without comment. But Wingate pressed him for an opinion. 'Well, my boy, if you insist-'

'I do.'

'I would say that you have fallen into the commonest fallacy of all in dealing with social and economic subjects-the "devil theory".'

'Huh?'

'You have attributed conditions of villainy that simply result from stupidity. Colonial slavery is nothing new; it is the

inevitable result of imperial expansion, the automatic result of an antiquated financial structure -,

'I pointed out the part the banks played in my book.'

'No, no, no! You think bankers are scoundrels. They are not. Nor are company officials, nor patrons, nor the governing classes back on Earth. Men are constrained by necessity and build up rationalizations to account for their acts. It is not even cupidity. Slavery is economically unsound, nonproductive, but men drift into it whenever the circumstances compel it. A different financial system- but that's another story.'

'I still think it's rooted in human cussedness,' Wingate said stubbornly.

'Not cussedness-simply stupidity. I can't prove it to you, but you will learn.'

The success of the 'silent radio' caused the Governor to send Wingate on a long swing around the other camps of the free federation to help them rig new equipment and to teach them how to use it. He spent four hard-working and soul-satisfying weeks, and finished with the warm knowledge that he had done more to consolidate the position of the free men against their enemies than could be done by winning a pitched battle.

When he returned to his home community, he found Sam Houston Jones waiting there.

Wingate broke into a run. 'Sam!' he shouted. 'Sam! Sam!' He grabbed his hand, pounded him on the back, and yelled at him the affectionate insults that sentimental men use in attempting to cover up their weakness. 'Sam, you old scoundrel! When did you get here? How did you escape? And how the devil did you manage to come all the way from South Pole? Were you transferred before you escaped?'

'Howdy, Hump,' said Sam. 'Now one at a time, and not so fast.'

But Wingate bubbled on. 'My, but it's good to see your

ugly face, fellow. And am 1 glad you came here-this is a great place. We've got the most up-and-coming little state in the Whole federation. You'll like it. They're a great bunch -'

'What are you?' Jones asked, eyeing him. 'President of the local chamber of commerce?'

Wingate looked at him, and then laughed. 'I get it. But seriously, you will like it. Of course, it's a lot different from what you were used to back on Earth-but that's all past and done with. No use crying over spilt milk, eh?'

'Wait a minute. You are under a misapprehension, Hump. Listen. I'm not an escaped slave. I'm here to take you back.'

Wingate opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. 'But Sam,' he said, 'that's impossible. You don't know.'

'I think I do.'

'But you don't. There's no going back for me. If I did, I'd have to face trial, and they've got me dead to rights. Even if I threw myself on the mercy of the court and managed to get off with a light sentence, it would be twenty years before I'd be a free man. No, Sam, it's impossible. You don't know the things I'm charged with.'

'I don't, eh? It's cost me a nice piece of change to clear them up.'

'Huh?'

'I know how you escaped. I know you stole a crock and kidnapped your patron and got two other clients to run with you. It took my best blarney and plenty of folding money to fix it. So help me, Hump-Why didn't you pull something mild, like murder, or rape, or robbing a post office?'

'Well, now, Sam-I didn't do any of those things to cause you trouble. I had counted you out of my calculations. I was on my own. I'm sorry about the money.'

'Forget it. Money isn't an item with me. I'm filthy with the stuff. You know that. It comes from exercising care in the choice of parents. I was just pulling your leg and it came off in my hand.'

'Okay. Sorry.' Wingate's grin was a little forced. Nobody likes charity. 'But tell me what happened. I'm still in the dark.'

'Right.' Jones had been as much surprised and distressed at being separated from Wingate on grounding as Wingate had been. But there had been nothing for him to do about it until he received assistance from Earth. He had spent long weeks as a metal worker at South Pole, waiting and wondering why 'his sister did not answer his call for help. He had written letters to her to supplement his first radiogram, that being the only type of communication he could afford, but the days crept past with no answer.

When a message did arrive from her the mystery was cleared up. She had not received his radio to Earth promptly, because she, too, was aboard the Evening Star-in the first class cabin, traveling, as was her custom, in a stateroom listed under her maid's name. 'It was the family habit of avoiding publicity that stymied us,' Jones explained. 'If I hadn't sent the radio to her rather than the family lawyers, or if she had been known by name to the purser, we would have gotten together the first day.' The message had not been relayed to her on Venus because the bright planet had by that time crawled to superior opposition on the far side of the sun from the Earth. For a matter of sixty earth days there was no communication, Earth to Venus. The message had rested, recorded but still scrambled, in the hands of the family firm, until she could be reached.

When she received it, she started a small tornado. Jones had been released, the liens against his contract paid, and ample credit posted to his name on Venus, in less than twenty-four hours. 'So that was that,' concluded Jones, 'except that I've got to explain to big sister when I get home just how I got into this mess. She'll burn my ears.'

Jones had charted a rocket for North Pole and had gotten on Wingate's trail at once. 'If you had held on one more day, I would have picked you up. We retrieved your ex-patron about a mile from his gates.'

'So the old villain made it. I'm glad of that.'

'And a good job, too. If he hadn't I might never have been able ~o square you. He was pretty well done in, and his heart was kicking up plenty. Do you know that abandonment is a capital offence on this planet-with a mandatory death sentence if the victim

dies?'

Wingate nodded. 'Yeah, I know. Not that I ever heard of a patron being gassed for it, if the corpse was a client. But that's beside the point. Go ahead.'

'Well, he was plenty sore. I don't blame him, though I don't blame you, either. Nobody wants to be sold South, and I gather that was what you expected. Well, I paid him for his crock, and I paid him for your contract-take a look at me, I'm your new owner!-and I paid for the contracts of your two friends as well. Still he wasn't satisfied. I finally had to throw in a first-class passage for his daughter back to Earth, and promise to find her a job. She's a big dumb ox, but I guess the family can stand another retainer. Anyhow, old son, you're a free man. The only remaining question is whether or not the Governor will let us leave here. It seems it's not done.'

'No, that's a point. Which reminds me-how did you locate the place?'

'A spot of detective work too long to go into now. That's what took me so long. Slaves don't like to talk. Anyhow, we've a date to talk to the Governor tomorrow.'

Wingate took a long time to get to sleep. After his first burst of jubilation he began to wonder. Did he want to go back? To return to the law, to citing technicalities in the interest of whichever side employed him, to meaningless social engagements, to the empty, sterile, bunkum-fed life of the fat and prosperous class he had moved among and served-did he want that, he, who had fought and worked with men? It seemed to him that his anachronistic little 'invention' in radio had been of more worth than all he had ever done on Earth.

Then he recalled his book.

Perhaps he could get it published. Perhaps he could expose this disgraceful, inhuman system which sold men into legal slavery. He was really wide awake now. There was a thing to do! That was his job-to go back to Earth and plead the cause of the colonists. Maybe there was destiny that shapes men's lives after all. He was just the man to do it, the right social background, the proper training. He could make himself heard.

He fell asleep, and dreamt of cool, dry breezes, of clear blue sky. Of moonlight...

Satchel and Jimmie decided to stay, even though Jones had been able to fix it up with the Governor. 'It's like this,' said Satchel. 'There's nothing for us back on Earth, or we wouldn't have shipped in the first place. And you can't undertake to support a couple of deadheads. And this isn't such a bad place. It's going to be something someday. We'll stay and grow up with it.'

They handled the crock which carried Jones and Wingate to Adonis. There was no hazard in it, as Jones was now officially their patron. What the authorities did not know they could not act on. The crock returned to the refugee community loaded with a cargo which Jones insisted on calling their ransom. As a matter of fact, the opportunity to send an agent to obtain badly needed supplies-one who could do so safely and without arousing the suspicions of the company authorities-had been the determining factor in the Governor's unprecedented decision to risk compromising the secrets of his constituency. He had been frankly not interested in Wingate's plans to agitate for the abolishment of the slave trade.

Saying good-bye to Satchel and Jimmie was something Wingate found embarrassing and unexpectedly depressing.

For the first two weeks after grounding on Earth both Wingate and Jones were too busy to see much of each other. Wingate had gotten his manuscript in shape on the return trip and had spent the time getting acquainted with the waiting rooms of publishers. Only one had shown any interest beyond a form letter of rejection.

'I'm sorry, old man,' that one had told him. 'I'd like to publish your book, in spite of its controversial nature, if it stood any chance at all of success. But it doesn't. Frankly, it has no literary merit whatsoever. I would as soon read a brief.'

'I think I understand,' Wingate answered sullenly. 'A big publishing house can't afford to print anything which might offend the powers-that-be.'

The publisher took his cigar from his mouth and looked at the younger man before replying. 'I suppose I should resent that,' he said quietly, 'but I won't. That's a popular misconception. The powers-that-be, as you call them, do not resort to suppression in this country.

We publish what the public will buy. We're in business for that purpose.

'I was about to suggest, if you will listen, a means of making your book saleable. You need a collaborator, somebody that knows the writing game and can put some guts in it.'

Jones called the day that Wingate got his revised manuscript back from his ghost writer. 'Listen to this, Sam,' he pleaded. 'Look, what the dirty so-and-so has done to my book. Look.

- I heard again the crack of the overseer's whip. The frail body of my mate shook under the lash. He gave one cough and slid slowly under the waist-deep water, dragged down by his chains." Honest, Sam, did you ever see such drivel? And look at the new title: "I Was a Slave on Venus". It sounds like a confession magazine.'

Jones nodded without replying. 'And listen to this,' Wingate went on, '"-crowded like cattle in the enclosure, their naked bodies gleaming with sweat, the women slaves shrank from the-"Oh, hell, I can't go on!'

'Well, they did wear nothing but harness.'

'Yes, yes-but that has nothing to do with the case. Venus costume is a necessary concomitant of the weather. There's no excuse to leer about it. He's turned my book into a damned sex show. And he had the nerve to defend his actions. He claimed that social pamphleteering is dependent on extravagant language.'

'Well, maybe he's got something. Gulliver's Travels certainly has some racy passages, and the whipping scenes in Uncle Tom's Cabin aren't anything to hand a kid to read. Not to mention Grapes of Wrath.'

'Well, I'm damned if I'll resort to that kind of cheap sensationalism. I've got a perfectly straightforward case that anyone can understand.'

'Have you now?' Jones took his pipe out of his mouth. 'I've been wondering how long it would take you to get your eyes opened. What is your case? It's nothing new; it happened in the Old South, it happened again in California, in Mexico, in Australia, in South Africa. Why? Because in any expanding free-enterprise economy which does not have a money system designed to fit its requirements

the use of mother-country capital to develop the colony inevitably results in subsistence level wages at home and slave labor in the colonies. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and all the good will in the world on the part of the so-called ruling classes won't change it, because the basic problem is one requiring scientific analysis and a mathematical mind. Do you think you can explain those issues to the general public?'

'I can try.'

'How far did I get when I tried to explain them to you-before you had seen the results? And you are a smart hombre. No, Hump, these things are too difficult to explain to people and too abstract to interest them. You spoke before a women's club the other day, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'How did you make out?'

'Well. . . the chairwoman called me up beforehand and asked me to hold my talk down to ten minutes, as their national president was to be there and they would be crowded for time.'

'Hmm . . . you see where your great social message rates in competition. But never mind. Ten minutes is long enough to explain the issue to a person if they have the capacity to understand it. Did you sell anybody?'

'Well.. . I'm not sure.'

'You're darn tootin' you're not sure. Maybe they clapped for you but how many of them came up afterwards and wanted to sign checks? No, Hump, sweet reasonableness won't get you anywhere in this racket. To make yourself 'heard you have to be a demagogue, or a rabble-rousing political preacher like this fellow Nehemiah Scudder. We're going merrily to hell and it won't stop until it winds up in a crash.'

'But-Oh, the devil! What can we do about it?'

'Nothing. Things are bound to get a whole lot worse before they can get any better. Let's have a drink.'